

## PRAYING AMONG LIFE'S RUINS

Psalm 74: 1-23 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

In the ruins and amid the ashes of our lives, prayer is still the only key to hope. In September of 2011, a very popular television evangelist whom most of you would know his name well, if I informed you, that famous television preacher stated a surprising answer for life when we are called to live amid life's ruins. He stated, "People married to spouses with Alzheimer's should consider them "dead," divorce them, and start new lives." Beloved, God has another plan for our lives when life bombs us and we are left stunned and weeping in the ruins. Jesus said in John 15: 13, "Greater love has no one than this; that someone lay down his life for his friends. When every shred of human hope and emotion and logic cries out for us to walk away from our suffering loved ones, Jesus would have us pray to Him for strength to lay down our lives for those we love. Jesus has a plan when our spouse or our parent has dementia or when they are incontinent, or when we face unemployment, or when we find our spouse is turning on us, or find out our own blood relatives are rejecting us, or find out that even our own Christian brothers and sisters are gossiping about us and misquoting us and attempting to betray us and destroy us. What's God's plan? James 5: 13 is so clear. "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray!

Praying can be lamenting to God. Each of us need to learn the importance of lamenting to God, with integrity and openness and transparency, expressing our hurt and disappointment with God to God. God longs for us to come to Him in prayer with our broken hearts and our disappointments as we sit in our ash heaps, in our desperate bombed out ruins of life. We must run to Jesus with our laments and appeal to Him for relief. I can often remember my mother singing her prayer in the midst of life's ashes and ruins—a song written by Chalvar A. Gabriel. The song goes, "Pray when the storm clouds gather o'erhead, Hiding the light from you; Filling your soul with darkness and dread, Pray till the light breaks through. Just keep on praying till light breaks through. The Lord will answer, will answer you. God keeps His promise, His word is true. Just keep on praying till light breaks through. (2) Pressed under sorrow, near to despair, Troubles your soul pursue; Go to your Father, tell Him your care, Pray till the light breaks through. Pray then believing, God on the throne Looks with compassion true. Unto His children, cares for His own, Pray till the light breaks through."

It may sound like an infinitely small thing to report to you, but as I was late on Friday evening working on this message, what to my wondering eyes should appear but a fax Chairman Bill Lowe sent me stamped February 16, 2014 stating, "Dear Applicant of the Evangelical Fellowship of Free Churches, We are pleased to inform you that upon review of your application for tax exempt status, we have

determined that you are exempt from Federal Income Tax under section 501 © (3) of the Internal Revenue Code.” It may seem like very little to some, but in 2010, our little Intermountain West District (22 churches) was orphaned from our mother organization. In an emergency meeting on May 24, 2010, we decided to remain a district and to form our own mother organization, a fellowship, not a denomination, called The Evangelical Fellowship of Free Churches—EFFC. We were sitting in ruins, now only 7 or 8 churches in the IWD. Most of our financial base was gone. Nevertheless, we have been praying and praying and praying and praying and praying and praying and the application sent in on April 12, 2011 is no longer an application. God has raised us from the ashes and the ruins and given us legitimate 501 (c) (3) status as a fellowship. Praise the wonderful Name of Jesus!

As I have studied this psalm, written by and accredited to Asaph, it is not written in the time of King David. The three mighty chief musicians of David were so mighty, their generations after them took their name as tribe names, attaching to all their descendants of the original Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthan. Only the total destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC fills the bill as the correct date for this psalm. Charles Haddon Spurgeon found a very significant peculiarity of this psalm. He wrote, "There is not a single mention of either personal or national sin in this psalm; and yet one cannot doubt that the writer was fully aware of the sins and iniquities of Israel that had brought all of this misery upon them. This destruction of Jerusalem and the temple was the fulfilled prophecy given by God to His prophets of the direct discipline of Judah for her idolatry and disobedience to God. Yet, this gifted musician and descendant of the first Asaph, this Asaph 500 years later is writing his worshipful lament about the fall of Jerusalem. In verses 1-2, Asaph begins his mournful lament that he led all Judah in singing, “O God, why do You cast us off forever? Why does Your anger smoke against the sheep of Your pasture? Remember Your congregation, which you have purchased of old, which You have redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage! Remember Mount Zion, where You have dwelt.”

Chris Tomlin is a modern day, chief musician who wrote “Your Grace Is Enough.” That glorious song seems also to have been written as a prayer from the ashes and ruins, and it echoes Psalm 74: 2. The song sounds like not much was left for the writer in a hard time, but God’s grace was still enough—“Great is Your faithfulness, oh God... You wrestle with the sinner's heart... You lead us by still waters and to mercy... And nothing can keep us apart... So remember Your people... Remember Your children... Remember Your promise, oh God... Your grace is enough... Your grace is enough... Your grace is enough for me... Great is Your love and justice... God... You use the weak to lead the strong... You lead us in the song of Your salvation... And all Your people sing along... Your grace is enough... Heaven reaching down to us... Your grace is enough for me... God, I see

Your grace is enough...I'm covered in Your love...Your grace is enough for me, for me." As we look deeper at this psalm, this lament put to music, let's break it down into three amazing stanzas. The big question as we approach this psalm is "What is God going to do with His people under His directed discipline?" Will God abandon His people as they sit and pine away in the ruins of their great ruined city of Jerusalem, with their glorious temple destroyed? Each of these three stanzas builds one upon the other to explain God's purpose in bringing strong discipline to come to His people when they remain in disobedience. What are the three aspects of God's purpose in disciplining His people?

**GOD HAS A DISCIPLINE WITH HIS PEOPLE THAT CAN BE STERN AND HARD TO RECEIVE FOR THE ONES WHO HAVE REJECTED HIS CALLS TO REPENT OF THEIR IDOLATRY.** (I.) Psalm 74: 1-11. Let's break

down these first 11 verses. Follow with me and let's look at nine images Asaph laments over in Judah's admission in dust and ashes that God's discipline has been complete, firm, stern, total and without restraint. Notice the progression. **(1) Discipline can seem to mean rejection by God.** Verse 1 states, "O God, why do You cast us off forever?" **(2) Discipline can mean we are smoked by God's anger.** Verse 1 continues, "Why does Your anger smoke against the sheep of Your pasture?" **(3) Discipline can leave us ruined by any measurable standard.** Notice verses 2, 3a—"Remember Your congregation, which you have purchased of old, which You have redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage! Remember Mount Zion, where You have dwelt. Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins." **(4) Discipline can leave us as damaged goods.** Notice the last part of verse 3. "The enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary!" **(5) Discipline can roar in and smash so much that is precious.** Notice verses 4-6. "Your foes have roared in the midst of your meeting place; they set up their own signs for signs. They were like those who swing axe in a forest of trees. And all its carved wood they broke down with hatchets and hammers." **(6) Discipline can burn up our hopes and our meeting places for worship as God's name is brought down to the ground.** "They set Your sanctuary on fire; they profaned the dwelling place of Your name, bringing it down to the ground. They said--v. 7, 8 to themselves, "We will utterly subdue them; they burned all the meeting places of God in the land. **(7) Discipline can profane and defile God's sanctuary.** Notice in verse 7b. "They profaned the dwelling place of Your name." **(8) Discipline can subdue us and leave us weak and helpless.** I read in verse 8, "They said to themselves, "We will utterly subdue them." **(9) Discipline can seem to cut us off entirely from God.** Notice verses 9-11. "We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet, and there is none among us who knows how long. How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile Your name forever? Why do You hold back Your hand, Your right hand? Take it from the fold of Your garment and destroy them!"

Notice in these words in the ruins, that Asaph and Judah, subdued by God's unrelenting discipline, had penetrating questions, searching questions to ask the Lord. There are three "Why?" Questions. Notice 2 of them in verse 1. "O God, why do You cast us off forever? and "Why does Your anger smoke against the sheep of Your pasture." Then a third why question in verse 11 asks, "Why do You hold back Your hand, your right hand? Take it from the fold of Your garment and destroy them." There is one "How long" Question in verse 10. "How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile Your name forever?"

Then notice further in these first 11 verses that Asaph and God's people amazing still expect God to deliver them based on their covenant relationship with Him. Beloved, sitting in the ashes and ruins of a stern time of discipline with God, it is still to be remembered, Hebrews 12: 6 tells us, "For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and chastises every son/daughter whom He receives." Notice Asaph not grasping at straws in the ashes, but laying claim to God's hope to arise from the ashes and ruins. (1) Notice in verse 1, as Asaph laments, reminding God of His covenant relationship with Judah, saying, "Why does Your anger smoke against who? –the sheep of Your pasture."

Perhaps Asaph was seated in the ruins of burning Jerusalem weeping before the temple, yet quoting Psalm 23: 1,2 and quoting it, saying, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures." Asaph is reminding the Lord who He is and who His people were—"the sheep of Your pasture." Then Asaph gains courage and goes farther in verse 2 saying, "Remember Your congregation, which You have purchased of old, which You have redeemed to be the tribe of Your heritage--Judah! Remember Mount Zion, where You have dwelt." But Asaph isn't through reminding God that despite the sting of God's rod, he was calling for God to remember to direct His attention to the perpetual ruins of the sanctuary, verse 3 and verse 7—Look, Lord. Don't overlook that in disciplining Your people, the rod of Nebuchadnezzar has not just subdued us, but destroyed everything in the sanctuary, and set Your sanctuary on fire. Asaph is pleading with God to remember whose sanctuary was still smoking. But Asaph is a worship leader who has the people in the ashes and ruins singing now, crying out to God in verse 4, saying, "Your foes have roared in the midst of Your meeting place and changed the signs there." And in verse 8, the people followed Asaph, saying "They have profaned the dwelling place of Your Name, Lord."

It is as if Asaph is leading God's people to cry out with David in Psalm 39: 10, 11, saying, "Remove Your stroke from me, I am consumed and spent by the blow and the hostility of Your hand. When You discipline a man with rebukes for sin, You consume like a moth what is dear to him. Surely all mankind is a mere breath!

Selah.” I am reminded of Stephen J. Pearson’s worship song. The first verse says, “O Lord God, Are You There, Remember us: are we not Your heirs? See the destruction to Your land. Why do you hold Your hand? See Your temple burning in ruins! Where are You, Lord? Rise up, O Lord. Come to our aid, O God.” Beloved, God’s discipline can be stern and hard to receive for the ones who have rejected His calls to repent of their idolatry as His people. Secondly, what is the second aspect of God’s purpose as He disciplines His people?

**GOD HAS A HISTORY WITH HIS PEOPLE OF DRAMATIC DELIVERANCES AND MIGHTY DISPLAYS OF HIS POWER, DESPITE THEIR DISOBEDIENCE AND HIS DISCIPLINE.** (II.)

Come with me to Psalm 74: 12-17. “Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. You divided the sea by Your might; You broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan; You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. You split open springs and brooks; You dried up ever-flowing streams. Yours is the day, Yours also the night; You have established the heavenly lights and the sun. You have fixed all the boundaries of the earth; You have made summer and winter. When we accept the discipline of the Lord, and call Him to remember His covenant with us, it isn’t long until we are singing of what will happen again as God comes to rescue us as He has rescued His people before. Another modern day chief musician is Ron Kenoly who sings, “You Alone.” The words are filled with “You alone,” even as verses 12-17 of Psalm 74. “You alone are holy... You alone are worthy... Only You alone deserve my praise... So I come before You... I honor and adore You... You alone are worthy of my praise... Only You alone... Lord I praise You... With everything in me... Lord I praise You... With honor I will sing... You alone are holy... You alone are worthy... Only You alone deserve my praise... So I come before You... I honor and adore You... You alone deserve my praise... Only You alone... Only You alone. Notice with me Asaph’s description of his relationship to the God of history. His story includes His relationship with me and my relationship with Him. Listen to Asaph in verse 12, “Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth.” I love this part of Asaph’s psalm. The lament is over and Asaph is singing history singing, “God my King is from of old.” Can you say with Asaph, “God is my King!?” Then in verses 13 and 14, Asaph pulls a pure Israelite joy that is our Judeo-Christian heritage—and our story too, the history of the Exodus. This is Asaph’s poetic picture of God dividing the Red Sea when God’s people were hopelessly trapped. At the same time, God broke the power of the mighty nation of Egypt, who is referred to as, v. 13, the heads of the sea monsters on the waters—speaking of monster crocodiles that consumed so many Israelite boy babies as boy babies kept the Nile crocodiles fat. Leviathan is just another dragon name for the Nile crocodiles from whom God delivered His people and from that greatest sea monster, Leviathan, Pharaoh whom God took down as the

waters of the Red Sea collapsed upon him chariots. When the bodies washed up on the shore, God gave Egypt's army leaders to the beasts of the wilderness. God split the rock to give water and dried up ever-flowing streams—Yes, God dried up the Jordan River so Israel could cross into the Promised Land. Verse 12 points to God's redemptive power to see and honor the blood of the lambs on the lintel and doorposts of Israel's houses and to save their first-born, working salvation in the midst of the earth, v. 12. Then Asaph goes global, magnifying the Lord for His creation and His mighty eternal displays of majestic Power in vs. 15-17. Wow! Who would have thought Asaph could rise from the ruins of Jerusalem to so bless the Lord for His-Story of Creation and Redemption? Thirdly and lastly,

**GOD HAS A NAME THAT IS AT STAKE AND HE WILL NOT ABANDON HIS OWN OR FORGET TO ARISE AND DEFEND HIS CAUSE WHICH IS HIS OWN PEOPLE.** (III.) Look with me at this final section of Psalm 74: 18-23.

“Remember this, O LORD, how the enemy scoffs, and a foolish people reviles Your name. Do not deliver the soul of Your dove to the wild beasts; do not forget the life of Your poor forever. Have regard for the covenant, for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence. Let not the downtrodden turn back in shame; let the poor and needy praise Your name. Arise, O God, defend your cause; remember how the foolish scoff at You all the day! Do not forget the clamor of Your foes, the uproar of those who rise against You, which goes up continually!” In the second verse of Stephen J. Pearson's song, “O Lord God, Are You There?” he writes, “O Lord God, our great King! Are You not ruler of all things. Haunts of violence fill this place. Save us from this disgrace! Hand not Your dove unto the beast! Where are You, Lord? Rise up, O Lord. Come to our aid, O God.” From the ruins of Jerusalem and the Temple, Asaph now reminds God at the close of this psalm, “Enemies are mocking You, reviling You, a foolish people have spurned Your Name. Your people are afflicted and in danger.” Now I love Asaph's pet name he gives to himself and God's people. Verse 19 gives it, “Do not deliver the soul of Your turtledove to the wild beasts as You gave Pharaoh and his army. Do not forget the life of, now another new name—“Your poor forever.” Now the challenge comes in verse 22. “Arise, O God, defend Your cause, Your Name and Your people. Remember Your people; Remember Your children. Don't forget the clamor of Your foes—not just our foes—they are Your foes-vs. 23. Verse 20—Remember Your covenant and Your promises to Israel—to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to David and to us. Don't leave us here in the ruins, as the downtrodden, v. 21 turned back in shame. Let Your poor and needy praise Your Name.—vs. 21. Stop the continuous uproar of Your foes that goes on continually. V. 22—Remember how the foolish scoff at You all day long. We are ready to break out in praise to Your Name. Remember us, save us, we have learned from Your discipline. We won't go back to idolatry. Display Your power yet one more time for us. Amen.